

## **2019 CSCAP Conference**

**Hanoi, 5-6 December, hosted by the incoming Chair of ASEAN**

The Hanoi Conference had the title, 'Sustaining Peace in Time of Uncertainties: toward greater regional resilience and responsiveness'. It was important that the CSCAP Vietnam committee was host, especially as the country is chairing ASEAN in 2020. The promotion of ASEAN's "resilience and responsiveness" will be the theme of Vietnam's chairmanship.

### **The Program**

The conference commenced with speeches from two emerging political leaders in ASEAN, Vietnam's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nguyen Quoc Dung - who provided insights into Vietnam's plans for ASEAN - and Malaysian Deputy Minister of Defence, Liew Chin Tong, whose speech combined respect for China's regional role with hard talk about some of China's current policies.

The six sessions of the conference covered: major power dynamics (a "new Cold War or Hot Peace?"), ASEAN's "Cohesiveness and Responsiveness", maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, the regional security implications of the current technological revolution, the future of multilateralism and, in the last session, a discussion of whether the future international order will be rules-based or power-based.

Don Greenlees spoke in the final session, dealing with the rules-based order.

In his wrap-up comments at the end of the conference, Tony Milner suggested that discussion at the conference supported Australian Prime Minister Morrison's view that we live in 'delicate times'. Talk of 'colder wars' and a 'hot peace' would have caught most people's attention; the session on the technological revolution was also disturbing, pointing to the dangers as well as opportunities that now face us. Talk of the cascading repercussions that can flow from a technological incident was haunting.

This said, Tony also claimed to leave the conference with a sense of elbow room. – of room for manoeuvre amidst the current strategic complexity, tension and anxiety. A range of middle powers have potential agency at present. This region is not locked into the rigidities of a Cold War – although there was debate at the conference about whether there is a significant ideological element in US-China competition.

One message, however, was that United States-China relations are not the only important dynamic in the world. Much more is going on. In this respect the recent CSCAP Memorandum on the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) seems pertinent. It argues that the ARF may have a new usefulness in this increasingly complex, messy environment. Its large membership and continuing focus on discussion rather than peace-keeping action – so often criticized by commentators – might just provide greater advantages today than it offered in the more stable regional configuration of a decade and more ago.

Beyond the US-China story, there is Japan – which has seemed to be making careful adjustments regarding China in its diplomatic strategies – and the developing nexus between China and Russia. This conference also saw a strong EU representation, reminding us of the European determination today to build an Asian – or Indo-Pacific - role beyond investment and trade. As for India, discussion at the India-Australia CSCAP Roundtable held in Melbourne a few weeks ago demonstrated that some in India are determined to expand India's role in East Asia, despite the country's hesitation regarding RCEP – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (launched by ASEAN).

At this conference, discussion of FTAs brought out another dimension of the current complexity. The decentralization entailed in the range of new FTAs – often forged between only two nations – has been described as not necessarily harmful. Also, the deeper integration they promote is likely to be significant.

The protagonist whom we had a good look at in the conference, predictably, was ASEAN. To open with speeches from two impressive ministers was a great advantage. Here and in the later conference session on ASEAN we got a sense of what might be meant by increasing 'cohesion and responsiveness', as the 2020 objective of the ASEAN organization. In what ways will ASEAN's 'Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' – formulated this year – be a basis for future initiatives in the wider region? How will Vietnam help to promote cohesion given – as some commentators insist – that ASEAN is divided over how to deal with China in the South China Sea?

A more 'responsive' ASEAN, so some comments at the conference suggested, will involve 'operationalizing' the Outlook. ASEAN will become more of a 'broker' in regional affairs – drawing on a long Southeast Asian experience of asserting agency in the midst of dangerous major power politics. The current competition between China and the US is by no means the first time Southeast Asian countries have had to negotiate around major power ambitions in their region. In the opinion of some commentators, ASEAN has a talent for combining expressions of respect for predominant powers with an element of frank, tough bargaining – and we saw an example of this approach in the opening speech of the conference.

A strong message at the conference was that we are moving from one era to another, and that is why we are talking so much about 'rules' – the 'rules-based order' – and about living in a 'delicate' time. The shaping of this new era is not just in US and China hands, nor is it solely in the hands of governments. Organizations like CSCAP have a role to play in negotiating rules – and deliberations at this conference, in their way, contribute to that process.